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ABSTRACT

A series of administrative and pedagogical questions about class size and the training of graduate teaching assistants caused the director of the freshman English program and the head of the Humanities department at Michigan Technological University to assemble an experimental class in freshman English. The course consisted of 113 students and 9 graduate teachers. Undergraduates read from a collection of essays; each student was expected to write two short, critical essays, complete a library project and a research essay, and keep a journal. The course incorporated small group work, in-class free-writing, question and answer sessions, and video programs. Lectures focused on writing assignments, provided in-class analysis of the writing context, included overhead projector demonstrations, and explored the use of sources. Interaction was encouraged by including graduate student teachers in lecture sessions and in small group discussions. Undergraduates reacted positively to the thematic content, presentational format, and lecturing style, but suggested improvements in transitions from lectures to discussions. Graduate assistants recommended that they be given more time to interact with students in discussion groups and to participate in lectures. All assistants reacted positively to the increased interaction with undergraduates, shared course responsibility, and senior faculty support. The experiment shows that a combined large group/small discussion group format can place graduate students and faculty into a more supportive environment that will more effectively educate freshman English students. (SG)

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Joseph J. Comprone

Managing Freshman English: Are We Really on the Right Track?

What About the Issue of Class Size?

The National Council of Teachers of English and the Conference on College Composition and Communication have for many years supported maximum class sizes of twenty for all writing courses. There are, of course, good reasons behind such policy. Some are pedagogical -- the writing process cannot be taught in courses with large numbers of students; teachers cannot effectively respond to drafts and essays written by more than twenty students in a section or course. Some reasons are political and social -- we as English teachers are most directly responsible in freshman English courses to the literacy needs of all university and college students; we need the time with each student to carry out effectively that responsibility. All these reasons -- and there are more than I have mentioned here -- are convincing in and of themselves.

On the surface, it would seem impossible to imagine a plausible argument against a position that is based on close interaction between teachers of writing and their students. Yet my own experience as teacher and administrator, while it does not cause me to reject entirely this position, does suggest some questions that over the years have become increasingly difficult for me to answer. I shall first provide a brief overview of my experience as a way of introducing the questions I now have about

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the way we manage graduate teaching assistant training in many of our freshman English programs.

My Experience and the Question of Class Size and the Training of Graduate Students

I have perhaps been as centrally situated as anyone to have experienced the problems which this unacknowledged state of affairs in freshman English creates for us year in and year out. For fifteen years of my twenty plus year college teaching career I administered or helped to administer writing programs at three large universities and one smaller one. During each of those fifteen years I fought to keep enrollment ceilings low. As a director of university writing programs, I argued for the typical university writing class size of 20-25 students per section because I was supporting a process pedagogy, one that required drafts, revisions, collaboration, and individual conferences. I also supported the low ceilings because I knew that the graduate students and part-time lecturers who taught most of the freshman writing courses at these institutions were already being exploited in their salaries and workloads; larger classes, I reasoned then, would only increase that exploitation. As a director of writing programs, I was also responsible for the professional training of these student-teachers; smaller classes for which those teachers were solely responsible seemed the only equitable way to manage that training.

For another four of those years I directed graduate studies at the University of Louisville, where I came to see the relationship between the teaching and academic lives of those student teachers from an even closer perspective than I had as writing program director. In that job, the difficulties my students had in juggling their work as teachers with their experiences as students seemed at times to me an impossible one. Whatever I did to coordinate their teaching with their academic work by helping them relate composition and rhetorical theory to their day-to-day teaching seemed always to come up short. "Course work is course work; teaching is teaching" one of my Louisville students once told me as I tried to explain how our theory and practice courses had been explicitly fashioned to bridge the gap between the graduate seminar or practicum and the freshman writing classroom. I tried to argue her out of that position then. I do not know that I would now.

Now I am in my third year as a department head in a mid-sized university with a well established composition and communication program. During this term as head my department has established a thriving doctoral program; we now employ forty teaching assistants, mostly to teach first-year English sections. Training these students as teachers is an enormous job, especially considering the fact that most of our teaching assistants are interdisciplinary communications students who have not had previous experience as English majors or had special training in composition. This

experience has provided me with yet another perspective on this issue. In fact, it has caused me to question what I now believe was a somewhat one-sided perspective on the issue of class size and professional training of graduate students in freshman English programs.

This recent questioning of my earlier notions about class size and freshman writing program administration has led in my thinking to a series of administrative and pedagogical questions that I believe we who help graduate students learn the job of teaching writing must address. Next, I will raise those questions in specific form; then, I will describe and draw implications from an informal experiment we recently conducted at Michigan Technological University that I think addresses these questions in new and potentially useful ways. Many of the implications raised relate directly to the issue of class size in writing programs that employ graduate teaching assistants.

Questions on Class Size and the Training of Graduate Teaching Assistants in Freshman English Programs

1. Have we, as program administrators, created structures of relationships that encourage flexible and consistent interaction between faculty and graduate teaching assistants on the teaching of writing and the setting of program goals and objectives?

2. Do we, as program administrators and mentoring faculty, actually share in official course responsibilities with the teaching assistants with whom we work? Are we sharing liability for grading and other programmatic responsibilities with graduate teaching assistants? Are we really with them all the way when questions of curricular and pedagogical responsibility arise?

3. Do we situate ourselves, again as mentoring faculty and program administrators, in a social space within which we are able to be involved in an ongoing dialogue with our graduate students as they teach? Are we there, in other words, when they need us, or are we phantom curriculum-makers and administrator-teachers who develop the plans but are not there when those plans go awry or simply do not meet all the exigencies of a required writing program?

An Experiment with A Large Class Format in Freshman English at Michigan Technological University

Description

Looking ahead to the winter term of 1990-91, the Director of First-Year English and the Humanities Department Head at Michigan Technological University were beset with two problems. One was recurring and had to do with long waiting lists of mostly upper

division students who needed to complete their freshman English requirement but were unable to gain entry to closed sections of the course. The other was a recently-developed need to provide training for inexperienced graduate teaching assistants, most of whom were not English majors. Both the first-year English director and the Head had considerable experience developing writing across the curriculum programs (WAC), both as consultants to other programs and at their own universities. Their WAC experience had convinced them that writing could be effectively taught in large-class formats if innovative methods were used and if the writing component of the course were reinforced by small-group and individual contact between students and teachers.

Both the director and head decided to put together an experimental class that would enable many of the backlogged students to get the first-year English course they needed and at the same time would enable the two of them to work closely and in new ways with the graduate teaching assistants assigned to the course. The one-term (ten weeks) course (the second in a required sequence of three communication courses) enrolled 113 (freshman through senior) students. Nine graduate teachers were assigned to the course as small-group leaders. Each instructor lead one group of 10-12 students. All students were required to attend one lecture of one-hour-and-twenty-minutes duration every week. Each student was also assigned to a one-hour-and-twenty-minutes discussion group each week. Otherwise the course adhered as

closely as possible to the common syllabus for the second course in the first-year English sequence at Michigan Tech: each student was required to have a multi-cultural reader from which they were expected to read clusters of essays on predominantly American themes; each student was expected to write two short, critical essays in response to a theme commonly presented and discussed in the class, and each was expected to complete a library project and short research essay (6-8 pages). They were also expected to keep a course journal of at least two entries a week. General themes, library methods, and rhetorical techniques for completing writing assignments were presented in lectures; discussion, revision, and evaluation of assignments, readings, and student essays were the subjects in discussion groups. Discussion leaders were also solely responsible for evaluating student portfolios and assigning grades at the end of the course.

So far this seems a fairly standard approach to large-course teaching at the lower-division level. How, then, was it innovative? We assert that it was different from the usual large undergraduate course in two essential ways. First, the lectures were themselves set up to encourage student participation and active learning through and within varied learning activities and structures (small group work, in-class free-writing sessions, large-group interaction through question and answer sessions between <u>both</u> students and the two lecturers <u>and</u> among students, graduate teaching assistants, and the lecturers, and by the use of

video material to engage students in critical thinking on the course themes. The lectures also focused on the writing assignments required in the course by providing in-class analysis of the context within which the assignments were written, by demonstrating on an overhead projector how assignments might be written, and by demonstrating as well how sources might be used within an essay in the research section of the course.

Second, the interaction between lecturers and graduate student teachers was purposely made more intensive by encouraging the graduate students to attend and participate in the lectures, and by requiring attendance by all teaching assistants and the lecturers at Monday afternoon discussions of course material and plans, writing assignments, and student responses to those materials and plans.

Research Methods

We had one graduate research assistant who attended and took notes at all lectures, selectively attended and took notes at discussion group meetings, and had formal interviews with all faculty lecturers and graduate teaching assistants both during and after the course. She also sat in on and took notes at all Monday afternoon staff meetings. Twice during the term we sent surveys to the teaching assistants asking them to report on both the everyday and long-term aspects of their discussion group experience, from

both their students' and their own apprentice-teacher perspectives. Once the course and staff meetings had permanently concluded, the research assistant conducted closing interviews with and received written reports from each of the teaching assistants. She then composed a summary report based on the written and oral reports of the teaching assistants. The identities of teaching assistants were not known to the researchers during the experiment itself; only after the course and data collection had been completed were the sources of some of the data gathered identified, and then only when the source chose to be identified. All these materials formed the basis for the results section that follows.

Summary of Research Results

Results were mixed from the perspectives of both the students who took the course and the graduate teaching assistants who led discussion groups.

The Student Perspective

Overall, student evaluations in the course were about average for first-year English courses at Michigan Tech (about 4.0 on a 5 point scale). In written responses attached to these evaluations, many students, particularly English as a second language students and a few older non-engineering students, responded positively to the American thematic content, presentational format, and lecturing

styles of the lectures and lecturers. One Asian student found the course fascinating because she was able to participate in and hear American culture discussed by lecturers and fellow students in an open and informative way. She suggested that the course not only helped her learn to write, but that it provided her with a useful and enlightening cultural experience as well. A good number of students enjoyed the opportunity to experience the different views of a wide range of students in the larger lecture format. These positive responses should be considered as well against the potentially negative connotations associated with any freshman course taught to primarily upper division students who often had been reluctant to take the course in the first place, or who sometimes were opposed in principle to the requirement of which the course was a part.

Overall, the students taking the course registered one consistently negative response: many felt that the transition from the lectures to the discussion groups were not effective. Although the faculty lecturers had been careful to elaborate on reading and writing assignments in lecture that would be discussed and worked on in the following discussion group meetings, many students were not able to follow up on the lecture presentations in discussions because the material was being re-presented by a different person. In some cases, students felt that the graduate teaching assistants who led discussions about particular assignments had not fully comprehended the assignments themselves. In fact, lecturers had

given teaching assistants the flexibility to adapt assignments given in lecture to their own group's needs, but that often seemed to have created more difficulties in continuity than it did provide opportunities for creativity.

In the end, 93 of the 113 students who took the course passed it with grades of C or above. Considering that these were often students whose attitudes were initially negative because they had either experienced previous difficulty with the course or had a difficult time registering for it, this completion rate is probably high.

The Graduate Teaching Assistant Perspective

The responses of graduate teaching assistants who taught the discussion sections of the course were also mixed in some very interesting ways. The assistants also felt that the continuity between lectures and discussions was weak. All of them recommended that more course time be devoted to discussion groups so that they would have the opportunity to create some of the sustaining relationships with students that they had for the most part been able to create when they had been fully responsible for twenty-five student sections of the course. A move to two rather than one discussion sessions each week was recommended by half the assistants, despite the increased amount of teaching time this would entail for them.

Along with increased time for discussion groups, several assistants argued that their schedules and remuneration should be set up in a way that would make mandatory attendance and participation of discussion leaders in the once-a-week lectures possible. This would allow for more detailed co-planning of lectures and discussion material by faculty lecturers and discussion leaders. It would also create more opportunity for collaboration on grading strategies related to contextual analyses of writing assignments and more detailed planning of strategies for presenting and using assigned readings. And, most important of all, it would enable faculty lecturers to get more immediate feedback on how well lecture material was carrying over into discussion sessions, and enable them as well to revise content, style, and delivery according to the recommendations included in that feedback. Finally, almost all the teaching assistants felt that discussion groups would have functioned more effectively if they had been able to work for a more sustained introductory period on creating coherent and functional work groups. Additional class time devoted to discussion groups and additional interaction between lecturers and teaching assistants on planning and managing workshops would have alleviated this problem as well.

On a more positive note, all of the graduate teaching assistants responded positively to the increased interaction and sharing of course responsibility that this large-class format made possible. The one new graduate teaching assistant who was involved

in the experiment was especially supportive of the idea of working with senior faculty and experienced colleagues in co-teaching the course. Having faculty who were experienced lecturers with very different lecturing styles present common course material to large groups of students every week provided the context for a great deal of useful and enlightening discussion on curriculum and pedagogy; it also placed the faculty lecturers in a position of "useful vulnerability," in which their teaching styles and perspectives were subject to everyone's response and discussion. Seeing over 100 hundred students together also provided the teaching assistants with a broader view of the community of students who take these courses at Michigan Tech than had previously been available to them when teaching twenty-five student sections. Students' opinions in lectures and discussions were also conditioned by a far broader range of student contributions in the 113-student lecture session. Minority and foreign students, older students, and women and men were more visible parts of <u>every</u> one of these sessions, even though there numbers remained low in proportion to the whole class.

<u>The</u> most positive part of this whole experiment for the graduate teaching assistants, however, was the sense of being supported by the faculty in their efforts to teach freshman English that grew out of the collaborative work necessary in planning and presenting the course. The graduate assistants simply felt they had more back-up with this lecture-discussion method than when they were given sole responsibility for a twenty-five student section.

I should add here that Michigan Tech has a first-rate graduate teaching assistant training program that includes a two-week summer orientation program for only Humanities graduate students, a three credit graduate practicum in teaching composition required of all teaching assistants as they teach, and a faculty mentor program that assigns a faculty member to each teaching assistant. This program, however, as professionally responsible as it is, does not appear to fill entirely the gap that exists between faculty and teaching assistants when each is respectively responsible for independent sections.

Back to the Class Size Questions

A synthesis of the results of this experiment suggest a generally negative answer to the questions that I previously posed regarding the conventional English Department, NCTE, and CCCC policies on class size for writing courses. While it remains true that ceilings of twenty or lower are most likely a good idea for writing courses taught by regular, tenure track faculty, this experiment would suggest that this is not the case when inexperienced graduate teaching assistants teach most of the sections in a freshman English program. In such programs, the demands placed on the teaching assistant by twenty to twenty-five non-majors, most of whom have not had high-quality writing instruction in secondary school, or who may be older students who have not had a writing course for many years, are exceedingly high.

To burden these teaching assistants with full responsibility for planning, teaching, and grading a class that most experts agree demands a broader knowledge of process pedagogy (using workshops, peer conferences, demonstrations, short lectures, and discussions, for example) than most literature courses is simply not justified. Even when other programs are in place to help these graduate teachers, and they sometimes are <u>not</u>, the independent small class set-up does not provide sufficient ongoing help and support with pedagogy, nor does it put the apprentice teacher in the position to answer questions regarding program and institutional goals that only an experienced faculty member can answer.

A structure that brings graduate teaching assistants and faculty together in planning, delivering, and evaluating freshman English courses does encourage this kind of cooperation. What our experiment at Michigan Tech suggests is that the following three guidelines must be adhered to if this lecture-discussion structure is effectively to replace small classes in freshman English programs in which graduate teaching assistants make up a large percentage of the instructional staff.

1. The lectures must in such a course be presented by faculty who are prepared to use innovative, process-oriented teaching techniques, including in-class free-writing "spots," group work, open question and answer periods, and the necessary visual media (transparencies and overhead projectors at the

least) to demonstrate the writing process to large groups of students. A team-taught course bringing together faculty with complementary teaching styles and philosophies of composition provide good opportunities for apprentice teachers to observe experienced faculty as they struggle to do a good job with one of the most difficult courses to teach on any campus.

2. As much planning must go into the structuring of the weekly interaction between faculty and graduate teaching assistants as goes into planning the course itself. Only with such careful planning -- before, during, and after the offering of the course itself -- will the students have the continuity they need to move efficiently from lectures to discussion sessions.

3. This re-structuring of freshman English is <u>not</u> cheaper. In fact -- despite the higher enrollment in lecture sessions -- the small size of discussion groups (12-14 at the most), the need for a research assistant to prepare materials for the teaching staff, and the need for strong media support for both lecture and discussion sessions can result in slightly higher costs than are incurred by assigning one graduate assistant to each class of twenty-five students.

Those who plan this large-class/small discussion group format carefully can place their graduate students and faculty into a more

supportive environment, one that will in the end more effectively educate freshman English students. These programs should also have ready answers to the criticism that is now be directed at those institutions and programs that have staffed over 60 to 70% of their lower division courses with graduate teaching assistants who have little if any previous teaching experience or knowledge of the composition field when they first teach the course.